

Annie Get Your Mop

It was only my fourth day on the job and I was being shown the door! Ohhhh, not to leave! . . . No such luck . . . To clear out little piles of dirt wedged between the exit doors and walls.

By Liz Fields
Introduction by Bob Foreman

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The 3200-seat LOEW'S STATE Providence, Rhode Island (Rapp & Rapp) first opened in October 1928. Exactly fifty years later we rechristened her the OCEAN STATE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER. The theatre had been given an eleventh hour reprieve from the wrecking ball.

The great Ted Stevens, who had previously opened and operated the Atlanta FOX, was named Director, and I, who had also started at the FOX, was hired as Technical Director. I was given a minuscule budget and a mandate to transform a dilapidated movie house into a fully functioning first class legitimate theatre.

In ninety days.

With this enormous task before us, I instructed my assistant, Joe Heelon, a local boy, to set the marquee to read "VOLUNTEERS WANTED! CALL 421 - 2997." Believing me to be insane, he patiently explained, "Bob, we're not in Atlanta. We don't have volunteers in Providence."

Fortunately he was incorrect, and a small and extremely brave band of volunteers did emerge, as I knew they would (they always do), and among them was Liz Fields who recounts her tortuous experiences in this wonderful short story.

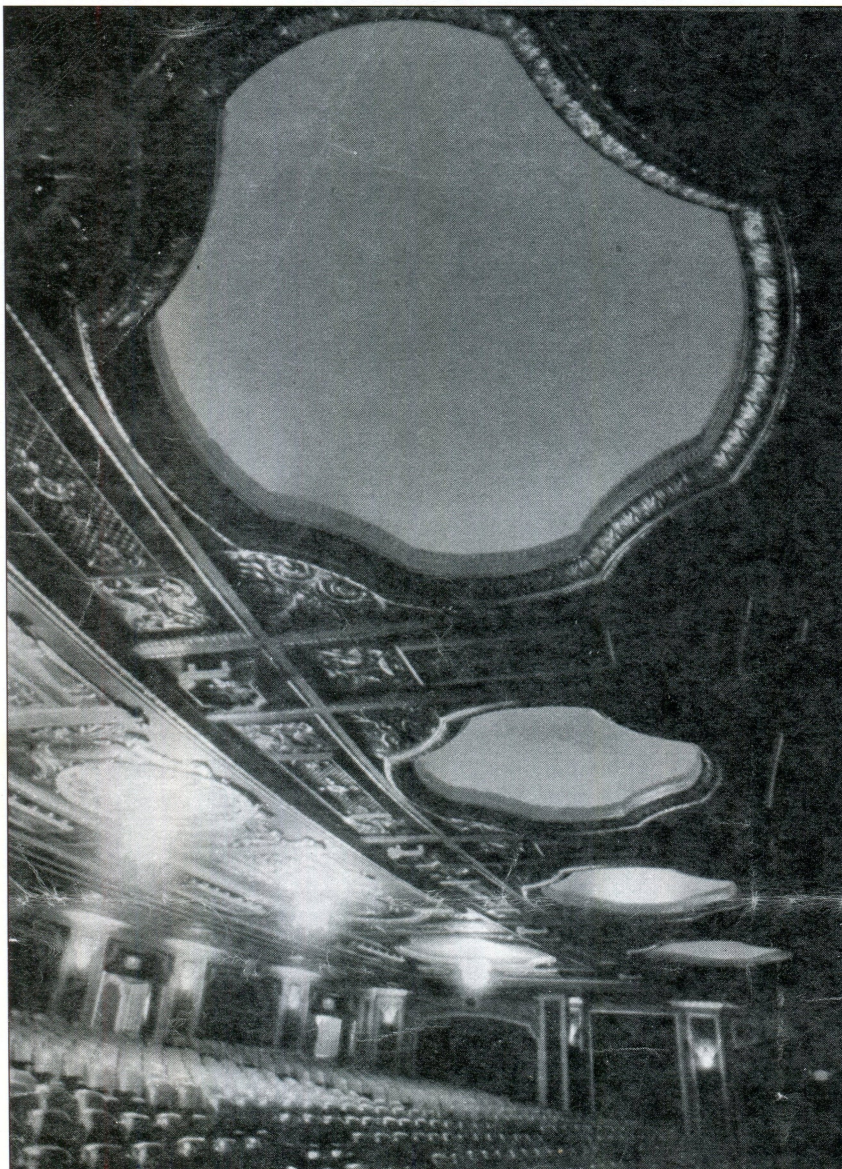
Miss Ethel Merman tore down the house on our opening night in that autumn of 1978, and the theatre, now known as the PROVIDENCE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, ranks as one of the most successful Palaces in the business.

Incidentally, if you feel the urge to volunteer, their phone number hasn't changed.

Bob Foreman



Theatre Historical Society/Michael J. B. Kelly



A view looking under the balcony (1977).

October, 1978

It was only my fourth day on the job and I was being shown to the door!

Ohhhh, not to leave!...No such luck...To clean out little piles of dirt wedged between the exit doors and walls.

"Get all that dirt out and the doors will close tightly," I was told.

Groan ...

And I thought being a volunteer at the OCEAN STATE THEATRE, getting the place spruced up and ready for opening night, was gonna be fun! Now, this door-dirt job was one of my better assignments. After all, hunched over these little piles of dirt, scraping madly away, at least I had that warm glorious sun beating down on my back.

"Just what am I doing here...on these final warm sunny September

days?" I muttered over and over to myself. A drifter shuffled by and looked at me a bit oddly.

I sighed, "Fields, you're crazy. Adventure is adventure, but this...?"

However, instead of marching out the door and away to freedom, I finished up and went searching for my next job, thinking back about that first day and that first AWFUL chore...

Annie Get Your Map

My most VIVID memory of the Ocean State will always be the state of the floors which lay in wait for us poor unsuspecting volunteers.

...Ah yes, I remember it well: taking down and lugging out the six foot heavy metal scaffolding to the theatre front. I remember so clearly the horror I felt when I was told to climb up on top of it. MEEEEEE? Up THERE? Out here on Weybossett Street? Ha! Ha! ...VERY reluctantly I agreed. After all, it was my first day.



Façade of the OCEAN STATE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER (1977).

Annie Get Your Mop

Even though I doubted my sanity in returning, for some unexplainable reason, I was glad to be there. I knew I was hooked for good.

So, this was it, my first “glamorous” job...unscrewing light bulbs and scraping chipping paint from the ceiling of the theatre marquee. (The very marquee that had screamed for volunteer help. Ha! No wonder.)

With all the debris flying around, I was glad I wore glasses. Mad I’d bothered washing my hair that morning. Wondered what possessed me to wear white pants.

Two painful hours later, back on earth again, brushing chips of the stuff out of my hair and mouth, rubbing my aching and permanently-bent-over back and neck, I swore I’d NEVER return.

“See ya, Liz,” I heard behind me as I made my fast getaway.

Right!!!!

“It’s Laurie from OCEAN STATE.”

They called me at home. They needed me. How could I refuse?

Somehow, I convinced myself that the “Michelangelo job” wasn’t really all THAT bad. So, I returned and was immediately escorted out to the front of the theatre, right up to the metal monster.

“Joe, oh, please, NO, not that. Oh, please. JOE, I DO NOT WANT THAT JOB AGAIN.”

He looked at the disobedient volunteer a bit cross-eyed, but he must have seen desperation in my face. He slowly backed away from the scaffolding looking around for some other delightful duty.

“Well, here’s a shovel and a broom.”

They had been sandblasting the marquee and the front of the theatre was a desert.

So, I swept and swept sand. I swept more sand and bagged it. I dragged and heaved sacks of sand onto the cart. Looking up at the marquee, choking to death on the dust, I apologized.

Even though I doubted my sanity in returning, for some unexplainable reason, I was glad to be there. I knew I was hooked for good.

“All done, Joe, now what?”

The fiasco in front of the theatre was only a minor symptom of what was to follow.

My most VIVID memory of the OCEAN STATE will always be the state of the floors which lay in wait for us poor unsuspecting volunteers.

Floors of guck! ICKY, gooey guck! Gucky gook! Dark black, sticky blobs and chunks of smelly gunk!

EVERYWHERE. Under seats. Behind seats. In all nooks and hard-to-get-at spots. Just waiting for the floor team to come and sweep, scrape,



View from the stage of the auditorium.

mop, Ajax, scrape, mop, scrape, mop mop, scrub, mop till mopper and mop drop.

There were the more obvious goodies such as the endless streams of sticky spilled soda; harder than hard pink blobs of bubble gum fastened like bolts to the floor; flattened out disks of Jujubes; dirt and hair covered cough drops; Q-tips with ear wax — ALL KINDS of rotting crud.

The eve of opening night we attacked the last floor section.

"Only 42 more rows to go," Joe announced gleefully. "We're almost done! Should take only about three hours to do this section. It's not anywhere near as bad as the center where most people sit."

11:00 p.m. There were four of us at it: scraper, sweeper, mopper, scrubber. My back was aching. My hands had dried up, were cut and blistered.

Midnight. From time to time I'd hear isolated little outcries of, "Ugh!" or "What is this?" Or "Yuck!" or "Slobs."

1:30 a.m. Scrape. Mop. Sweep. Scrub. "You missed a spot." "Where's the scraper?" "Oh, my achin' feet."

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*I found myself ready to belt anyone making any kind of negative comment about the theatre.
There was no need to worry.*

2:00 a.m. The water had to be changed every two rows. The mops are black forever as are all our fingernails.

3:30 a.m. Exhausted, I finally collapsed in a chair. (Back O.K.? Screws all tight? Any squeaks? Oh boy...I knew it was late.)

With five more rows to go I could do no more. Finished. Dead. Wiped out. AND, not the least bit guilty.

I looked around me at the energy being put out at this ungodly hour in order to be ready for curtain the next day.

There was Dick, a pharmacist, sitting in the middle of the stage ripping apart curtain seams.

The Brown University research per-

son still in the pit trying to get the machinery functioning smoothly. The orchestra platform hadn't moved since 1954. It moved now but made an awful noise as it went up.

The jewelry salesman was checking every seat to make sure they were all fit to sit in.

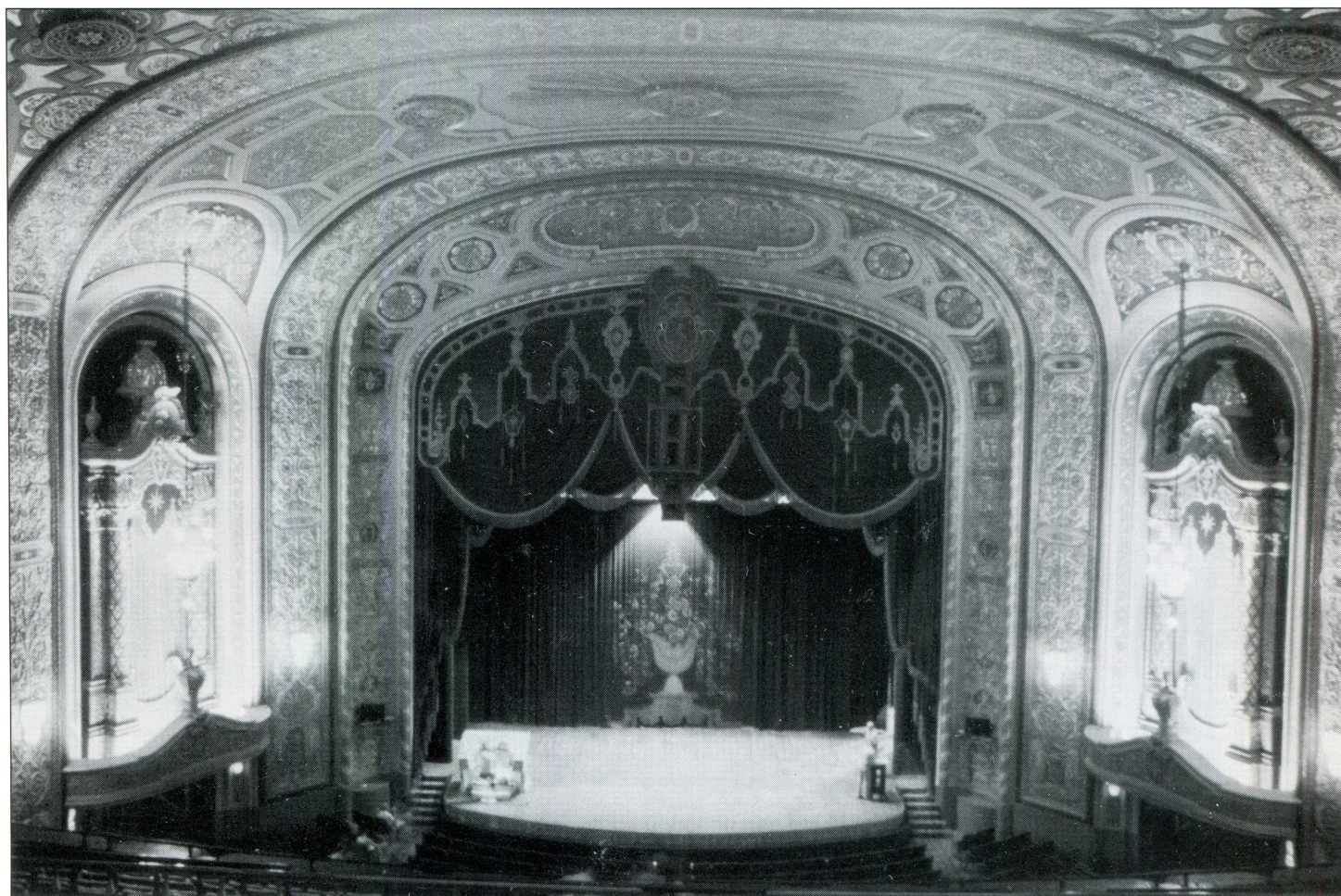
4:00a.m. The floor was done!!!

Less than 16 hours later, back to the theatre for the opening festivities.

Lights were dimmed. The audience was quiet.

I glanced around the vast theatre and felt excited knowing that in many small ways I'd helped make it work.

I knew that everyone would look at



Proscenium and organ screens from the balcony.

Theatre Historical Society, Michael Miller photo

the gold edge of the orchestra pit that Debbie and I had painted!

I knew there wouldn't be a trace of dust on any sleeves, back, skirts or pants.

I knew people's shoes wouldn't stick to the floor and that elegant ladies wouldn't stub their exposed toes on wads of gum hidden in the darkness.

Watching the Brian Jones Tap Dancers rise on the platform to stage level, I silently admired the black wall in the pit I had helped paint and as they tapped across the new floor, I wondered, who, among them, had used the bathroom backstage I had scrubbed out one afternoon.

Intermission. In spite of my filthy, black and split nails, I would still sell champagne out in the beautiful first balcony hall (whose carpet I spent an afternoon vacuuming).

Filling up glasses (that I helped lug upstairs the day before) I found myself ready to belt anyone making any kind of negative comment about the theatre.

There was no need to worry.

It was a glittery, joyous crowd. Everyone was pleased and excited about the theatre opening and the way it looked.

The Rhode Island Philharmonic began to play.

My mind wandered to Steven who came from Georgia as a volunteer, paying his own air fare, to help the sound crew.

And to those poor souls who had climbed unfathomable heights to install new lights and bulbs. (How beautifully lit the theatre is!)

And to the bevy of high school kids; those grubby-looking, hard-working kids now transformed into spiffy ushers.

I looked at "their" seats; seats they spent HOURS and HOURS working on!

They had removed screws, staples, backs, panels, tops, bottoms, arms.

They uncovered, measured, cut, recovered, replaced, oiled, tested, checked, rechecked seat after seat. They worked and worked on seats.

You could always find one of the "chairpeople" plopped down on the floor in the middle of the main hall amid a maze of gold covering material, seats piled high, hammers, nails, clips, tools of all kinds. They worked forever on the seats.

It was just so appropriate that the seat people became people seaters opening night.

All that hard physical work was not in vain. There are certain benefits resulting from acute volunteerism. Among the most commonly noted are: toughened floor-proof knees, Incredible Hulk-ish arms and returnitis.

"I'm no longer muttering to myself, 'Fields, you're crazy...What are you doing here?'" Instead, I'm wondering how soon I can get back to some more back-breaking chores.

Let's see...I know all the plaster on the walls beneath the stage needs to be scraped off...Wonder if they need any help...

"Hey, Joe....."

**PROVIDENCE PERFORMING
ARTS CENTER**
[Loew's State, Ocean State Performing
Arts Center]

Opened: October 6, 1928
Architect: Rapp & Rapp
Seats: 3232

1928

1978

**October Sixth
Ocean State
Performing Arts Center**

In honor of the 50th anniversary of Loew's State Theatre Building and the founding of the Ocean State Performing Arts Center.

Proudly Presents
Presentation of the Colors
and the National Anthem
Quantico Marine Band

The President of Ocean State Performing
Arts Center Bruce G. Sundlun

A Salute to George M. Cohan
Brian Jones All Tap Revue
Quantico Marine Band

Intermission
Champagne is available in the Lower and Upper Lobbies

Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra
George Kent - Conductor

Suite from "Star Wars" original score by John Williams
Star Wars
Princess Leia's Theme
The Little People
The Throne Room

Intermission

ETHEL MERMAN

in concert with The Rhode Island
Philharmonic Orchestra
Eric Knight, Conductor

Produced By
T. E. STEVENS

Technical Director
Robert L. Foreman III

Cover design by Pamela Kuehl

Exclusive concert management for Miss Merman and Mr. Knight
Robert Gardiner
610 West End Avenue - Penthouse B.
New York, New York 10023



The PROVIDENCE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER will be featured in the 2006 MARQUEE Conclave issue. A visit to the theatre will be part of the Theatre Historical Society's 2006 Boston Conclave/Theatre Tour.